



Getting the Green Light

A rancher's tips for gaining access to private land this season

By Dan Anderson

It's no secret that much private land in Montana is off-limits to public hunting. Some landowners reserve their property for friends or family, others lease it to outfitters, and some restrict access to maintain privacy or simply to avoid the hassle of strangers on their land.

As a result, too often hunters give up trying to hunt any private land not enrolled in the Fish, Wildlife & Parks Block Management Program. They should reconsider. Many farms and ranches, even those with "No Trespassing" signs or orange gate posts, may not be entirely closed. The key to gaining access is knowing exactly how—and when—to ask permission. Yet many hunters who knock on my door kill their chances before the first words spill out of their mouth.

For 50 years I've been fielding requests for permission to hunt our acreage. Sometimes I grant permission and sometimes I don't. Often the reason is obvious. A big SUV pulled into our driveway last year, loaded with half a dozen hunters wearing blaze orange. A guy in the backseat rolled down his window and addressed my wife, Emily, who was doing her barn chores, with, "Hey, honey!"

I'll leave her response to your imagination. Thankfully, we've had far more pleasant experiences—many of them resulting in us granting permission. Having fielded hundreds of requests over the years, I've assembled a list of permission-asking dos and don'ts that apply to our property and, I suspect, would produce similar results on other ranchlands across Montana.

DO:

- ▶ Ask early, preferably weeks or even months before hunting season. If you are reading this in September, now is the time to get permission for the deer and elk firearms season, not in November.
- ▶ Make your request in person if possible, rather than by telephone, unless you already know the rancher. The phone puts the landowner on the spot, and under pressure the answer will likely be "No." Asking by email or in a letter is second best.
- ▶ Visit the ranch in nonhunting garb.
- ▶ Be polite and friendly, but it's okay to be a tad persistent. If the rancher doesn't give you an emphatic "No!" there may be hope.

- ▶ Know who owns the land you want to hunt and where the boundaries end. Years ago that involved a trip to the county courthouse, but these days software available for your GPS or smartphone makes it much easier. You'll embarrass yourself by asking a rancher for permission to hunt on land that's not his or hers.

- ▶ Show interest in the rancher's operation, but don't feign knowledge you don't have.
- ▶ Detail exactly who will be hunting. You alone (and stick to this) is best. You and one other is often okay. But you and more than one? No.
- ▶ Hunting with traditional tools (longbow, lever-action rifle, or single-shot rifle) can be a plus in some ranchers' eyes and may be worth mentioning.
- ▶ Offering to help with ranch work can be useful, but remember that much of it involves running complex machinery you probably don't know how to operate. Fencing is one area where ranchers need labor and often welcome help.
- ▶ Find common ground with ranchers and farmers. Social interaction through a club, organization, or church is a plus.

DON'T:

- ▶ Don't cruise roads during hunting season, spot game, then ask at the nearest ranch or farm house for permission to hunt. A dozen other hunters have probably seen the same buck and have already pestered the landowner. You should have done your scouting and asking weeks before.
- ▶ Any evidence of alcohol consumption—odor, behavior, beer cans on the dash—is cause for immediate refusal.
- ▶ Avoid asking on Sundays, particularly in the morning.
- ▶ Don't show up with mud-splattered trucks or ATVs. To ranchers and farmers, that mud likely means you've been off-road making ruts—the last thing they want on their property. If your hunting vehicle is a monster truck with oversized tires, festooned with in-your-face decals and carrying a muddy four-wheeler in the bed, you might want to borrow your spouse's car for asking permission.

Dan Anderson and his wife, Emily, own a ranch in south-central Montana.

- ▶ Don't act as if you're doing the rancher a favor by offering to "thin out" the game animals on his or her place. Yes, whitetails consume a good share of my alfalfa, but I still like and admire the animals. I didn't respond well to the man who called them "white worms" and offered to fix my "problem" with his pocketful of doe tags.
- ▶ Don't display firearms that may be intimidating. I've come to admire the accuracy and adaptability of the AR-15 platform (though as a Marine I considered them wretched little rifles), and I won't quarrel with those who use them for hunting. That said, it will take many years for these firearms to be completely accepted by the nonhunting public. A "black rifle" hanging in the window of your pickup may connote combat to some landowners.

IN THE FIELD:

- ▶ So you've done everything right, and a rancher or farmer has opened that gate a crack. But like a new employee, you're only on probation. Whether you'll be welcomed back depends on how you treat the owner and the land. Some additional tips:
- ▶ Don't show up with additional hunters. If

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you've received permission, consider it a treasure, but not one you can share. If you've told the rancher you and your daughter will hunt, don't bring a buddy and his son as well. Don't even ask. A primary pet peeve among ranchers I know is the ripple effect of giving permission to people who then bring friends, who then bring their friends, and so on.

- ▶ Obey any of the rancher's bag restrictions, even those more stringent than what your license allows. If the rancher asks that you shoot cow elk only (or doe whitetails or mule deer bucks), you need to honor that request.
- ▶ Drive as little as possible. Any vehicle or ATV use must be approved in advance.
- ▶ Unless otherwise instructed, leave gates as

you find them—open if open, closed if closed. You aren't doing the rancher a favor by closing a gate you find open. You may be shutting livestock away from water.

- ▶ Never litter, even so much as a gum wrapper.
- ▶ Check back with the rancher on your way out. He or she will want to know how you did, what you saw, and if you spotted anything suspicious.
- ▶ Once you get home, whether you took game or not, send the landowner a note of appreciation. If you want to give a bit more, you can never go wrong with a gift card for a local restaurant.
- ▶ Finally, when asking permission to hunt on private property, keep in mind what Emily and I say about our life on land that's been in her family since the 1890s: We don't live in our rather modest house; we live on the ranch. Every pasture, coulee, and patch of woods is another room in our house. When you ask to hunt on our ranch, you're asking to *come into our house* and seek game with a deadly weapon. Everything you can do to create trust bodes well for your chances of success, both in asking permission and, if receiving it, being welcomed again. 🐾



THE PAYOFF Asking permission to hunt private land is a skill well worth learning. The reward can be access to game-rich land off-limits to hunters unwilling to follow simple rules of polite behavior and respectful conduct.

LEFT: PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS; RIGHT: DENVER BROWN